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Howard politicians break down vote results

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As news of victory or defeat rolled in at watch parties, through TV sets and on Twitter, candidates and their supporters traded on gut feelings, turnout numbers and observations gathered at the polls to explain Election Day results.

A week later, the political wonks are ready to crunch the numbers and analyze outcomes.

There's a lot to look at. Howard County's elections in 2014 tread familiar ground in some respects, with Republicans winning solidly in western districts and Democrats maintaining their dominance in Columbia. Other districts, however — particularly in the vicinity of Ellicott City, Howard's county seat — were the site of dead-heat races and, in the case of the first County Council district, an outcome that remained uncertain until late Tuesday night.

And, at the top of the county ticket, the race for executive was a nail-biter until around 11 p.m., when Republican candidate Allan Kittleman pulled ahead of his opponent, Democrat Courtney Watson, in votes — at one point leading by only two — and continued to add to his lead to pull off a close but decisive victory.

"We were cautiously optimistic, but we knew Allan was going to do it," Loretta Shields, chair of Howard County's Republican Party, said of the vibe election night.

Shields said she was less confident about the outcome of the governor's race.

"For Allan, [victory] wasn't a surprise, it was just a wonderful climax. For Larry [Hogan, Maryland's Republican governor-elect], I just wasn't sure."

Election night, the narrative of Kittleman's victory was that his race was won with the support of a range of voters across the spectrum — the Republican base, but also county Democrats and Independents.

"We're only 30 percent of the electorate in Howard County, and I know we didn't have 100 percent Republican turnout," Shields said. At the Republican watch party at Chef Paolino Cafe in Ellicott City, she added, some supporters showed up wearing "Democrats for Kittleman" T-shirts.

An initial analysis of voting data broken down into precincts, released early this week, shows Columbia might have been part of the key to Kittleman's victory, said Dave Myers, a consultant for Republican political strategy firm Core Strategies.

"Going through the numbers, I don't think that it's just because of Larry Hogan that Allan was able to win," Myers said. "I think [the numbers show] that he has quite a coalition of Democrats that were working with him, just looking at the numbers in Columbia, and his strong command of the west helped put him over the finish line."

While turnout hovered around an average of 40 percent in the first, second, third and fourth council districts, voter participation in the west was a good six points higher, suggesting enthusiasm among conservative voters for the governor's and county executive's race.

Some county political commentators, particularly Democrats, had theorized that the Republican party's decision not to run candidates in the third and fourth council districts, which have strong Democratic registration numbers, was a strategy to encourage some Democratic voters to stay home. Precinct data, however, did not show a markedly lower turnout in Columbia relative to Ellicott City's swing district or **Council District 2, where Council Chair Calvin Ball had a challenger in Republican Ralph Colavita.**

Bill Woodcock, a Courtney Watson supporter who weighs in on county politics at his blog, 53 Beers on Tap, said he thought turnout was an important consideration, but that viewing the election only through that lens was unfair to Kittleman as a candidate.

"All along the course of the campaign, I thought that there was always a path where either candidate could win, and I always thought the Courtney Watson path to victory was easier than the Allan Kittleman path, but he still had a path," Woodcock said. "He ran a very good race, and in this climate people were receptive to his message."

Woodcock and Myers both attributed victories in Howard's swing districts in part to the winning candidates' name recognition. In House District 9B, Bob Flanagan, a Republican and former delegate, defeated former CA Board member Tom Coale by 10 points, while in Council District 1, Democrat Jon Weinstein, a local business owner who had previously run an unsuccessful campaign for House District 9A, eked out a victory over political newcomer Kevin Forrest Schmidt.

"I think [Coale] ran a good race ... but I think name recognition and low-budget campaigning and Republican voting tendency in that area was what made the difference for him," Woodcock said of the 9B race.

"I think [Flanagan] has been around for a while; he ran for the council seat in 2010, which is almost all inside of 9B ... and he's one of the most prolific campaigners in the county," Myers said.

In District 1, "Weinstein is a name known to the community," Shields said, though she pointed out that Schmidt lost by the closest margin in the past three election cycles in a district that has historically been competitive.

The numbers-crunching and picking apart what candidates did right and wrong will continue. In the meantime, Myers predicted that the 2014 elections would be seen as a watershed moment for Republicans in the state and county.

"I think looking back 10, maybe 15 years from now, we're going to see this election as the beginning of a two-party system in Maryland, and maybe even in Howard County," he said. "I think it really shows that the Republican party in Howard County is relevant, it's relevant in Maryland, and they can't be written off."

On his blog, Woodcock said he wasn't so sure.

"The Democratic brand took a licking, but it keeps on ticking," he wrote. "The way back will not be easy, but there is a way back, and with the still-overwhelming Democratic registration advantage and better strategies on getting voters to turn out, it's a shorter path than what some Republicans, and many Democrats, may perceive."